

Effect of the Supplemental Use of Antioxidants Vitamin C, Vitamin E, and Coenzyme Q10 for the Prevention and Treatment of Cancer

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Preface

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), through its Evidence-based Practice Centers (EPCs), sponsors the development of evidence reports and technology assessments to assist public- and private-sector organizations in their efforts to improve the quality of health care in the United States. The reports and assessments provide organizations with comprehensive, science-based information on common, costly medical conditions and new health care technologies. The EPCs systematically review the relevant scientific literature on topics assigned to them by AHRQ and conduct additional analyses when appropriate prior to developing their reports and assessments.

To bring the broadest range of experts into the development of evidence reports and health technology assessments, AHRQ encourages the EPCs to form partnerships and enter into collaborations with other medical and research organizations. The EPCs work with these partner organizations to ensure that the evidence reports and technology assessments they produce will become building blocks for health care quality improvement projects throughout the Nation. The reports undergo peer review prior to their release.

AHRQ expects that the EPC evidence reports and technology assessments will inform individual health plans, providers, and purchasers as well as the health care system as a whole by providing important information to help improve health care quality.

We welcome written comments on this evidence report. They may be sent to: Director, Center for Practice and Technology Assessment, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 540 Gaither Road, Suite 6000, Rockville, MD 20850.

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Structured Abstract

Objectives. The objective of this report was to conduct a comprehensive literature review and synthesis of evidence on the use of the supplements vitamin C, vitamin E, and coenzyme Q10 for the treatment and prevention of cancer.

Search Strategy. We performed a search of 13 databases through early 2001 using the terms coenzyme Q10, vitamin C, and vitamin E and their many pharmacological synonyms. The bibliographies of review articles were also searched, and experts were questioned to identify additional citations.

Selection Criteria. Reports were included in the synthesis of evidence if they focused on the use of supplements of coenzyme Q10, vitamin C, or vitamin E for the prevention and treatment of cancer and presented the results of clinical trials on human subjects. Language of publication was not a barrier to inclusion.

Data Collection and Analysis. All selected titles, abstracts, and articles, in all languages, were reviewed independently by two reviewers fluent in the appropriate language. Information was collected about patient demographics, disease state, intervention, study design, and outcomes. We focused on three primary outcomes: death, development of new tumors, and effect on colonic polyps. For deaths and new tumors, the trials were too heterogeneous to pool for meta-analyses. For colonic polyps, the trials were sufficiently homogeneous to support a meta-analysis.

We also identified a group of trials with intermediate outcomes, and these were reviewed in a qualitative analysis.

Main Results. We identified 432 articles for screening from which 35 articles met the criteria for inclusion in the analysis. These articles represented 37 unique studies and 22 unique trials, because many studies presented data on the same trial. The identified trials varied greatly in quality. For the doses and populations studied in the trials.

- There was no evidence found for assessing the efficacy of coenzyme Q10 for prevention or treatment of cancer.
- We identified three large trials assessing the effect of vitamin C and vitamin E in various combinations given to persons without cancer. No trial reported a statistically significant beneficial effect on death due to cancer. Subgroup analysis did identify a statistically significant 9% reduction in all cause mortality and a borderline significant 13% reduction in all-cancer mortality associated with supplemental vitamin E in combination with other micro-nutrients. All other trials showed no benefit for all other types of new tumor development except for one arm of the ATBC trial, which showed a decrease in the development of new prostate tumors.
- We identified seven trials that assessed the use of vitamin C in patients with advanced cancer. No trial reported a statistically significant mortality benefit.
- There was no decrease in risk of death for vitamin C as a treatment for advanced cancer.

- We identified six trials assessing the effect of combinations of vitamin C and vitamin E with and without beta-carotene on the development of colonic polyps. No trial reported a statistically significant beneficial effect.
- We identified six unique trials that reported on various intermediate outcomes.
- The following beneficial results were reported from single trials:
 - a. Vitamin C was found to be beneficial in reducing the occurrence of new tumors in a single trial of patients with bladder cancer also treated with bacillus Calmetee-Guerin (BCG).
- Vitamin E in combination with omega-3 fatty acid increases survival in patients severely ill with a variety of malignancies.
- A number of intermediate outcomes studies were positive.

Conclusions. For the interventions tested, in the populations described, there is scant evidence that vitamin C or vitamin E beneficially affects survival. Similarly, for the interventions tested, in the populations described, there are no results suggesting a benefit for the prevention of new tumors, which reach statistical significance with the exception of prostate cancer in subjects treated with alpha-tocopherol. One trial reported a benefit of a megadose vitamin therapy on the development of new tumors in patients with bladder cancer. However, the ability to infer from this finding is limited because the multi-component intervention limits our ability to attribute the reported efficacy to any particular component.

For the outcome for colonic polyps, four trials focusing on secondary polyp recurrence could be pooled for analysis and none used vitamins C or E as a single intervention. The combination of vitamins C and E was not clinically superior to placebo in secondary prevention. The combination of vitamins C and E with beta-carotene or vitamin A did show a trend favoring a reduction in polyp recurrence, but this finding was not statistically significant.

The systematic review of the literature does not support the hypothesis that the use of supplements of vitamin C or E or coenzyme Q10 generally help prevent and/or treat cancer. There were isolated findings of benefit, which require confirmation.

Future Research. Future research should be done to confirm the positive findings from the single trials identified here. Investigation should be undertaken to understand the discrepancy between the epidemiologic evidence and the clinical trial data. Additional research should include population (such as women) not well studied.

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Contents

Summary.....	1
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EVIDENCE REPORT

Chapter 1. Introduction.....	7
Purpose	7
Specific Aims.....	7
A Brief Review of the Use of CAM for Cancer Treatment.....	7
Antioxidants and Cancer.....	7
The Origin of Ideas on Diet and Cancer Prevention.....	8
Cancer Development	9
The Antioxidant Supplements and Cancer Prevention.....	10
Chapter 2. Methodology	11
Scope of Work	11
Objectives	11
Literature Search Design	12
Technical Expert Panel.....	12
Identification of Literature Sources	12
Evaluation of Evidence	13
Extraction of Data	14
Selection of Studies for Meta-Analysis	15
Risk Ratio Analysis	15
Meta-Analysis for the Colonic Polyps Outcome	16
Publication Bias	17
Chapter 3. Results	21
Description of the Evidence.....	21
Analysis of Studies Reporting on Death.....	21
Studies Reporting on Death from the ATBC Trial.....	22
Studies Reporting on Death from the Linxian Trials.....	23
Studies Reporting on Death from Trials Using Vitamin C as Treatment	23
Summary of Results from the Analysis of Death.....	24
Trials Not Included in the Death Analysis	24
Analysis of Studies Reporting on New Tumor Development	26
Studies Reporting on New Tumor Development from the ATBC Trial	26
Studies Reporting on New Tumor Development from the Linxian Trials	27
Studies Reporting on New Tumor Development from Other Trials	28
Summary of Results from the Analysis of New Tumor	
Development Outcome	28
Studies Not Included in the New Tumor Development Analysis.....	28

Analysis of Trials Reporting on Development of Colonic Polyps	29
Meta-Analysis for Secondary Prevention of Polyp Formation.....	29
Trials Featuring Combinations of Vitamins C and E Only for Secondary Prevention of Polyp Formation.....	30
Trials Featuring Combinations of Vitamins C and E with Beta-Carotene or Vitamin A for Secondary Prevention of Polyp Formation.....	30
Trials Reporting on Polyp Formation Not Included in the Above Analysis	31
Trials Reporting on Intermediate Outcomes.....	31
Chapter 4. Conclusions	41
Limitations of the Review	41
Heterogeneity.....	41
Quality of the Trials	42
Publication Bias	42
Diverse Interventions	42
Other Limitations	43
Chapter 5. Future Research.....	45
References.....	47
Evidence Table	53
Bibliography	73
Appendix A. Acknowledgments	95
Appendix B. Search Methodologies	99
Appendix C. Antioxidant Screener	105
Appendix D. Quality Review Form	107